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THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

117

Sex cults
Hanging Rock: what happened?
Curse of the Celtic heads
Countdown to the end
Cottingley - the truth

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THE Unexplained
MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

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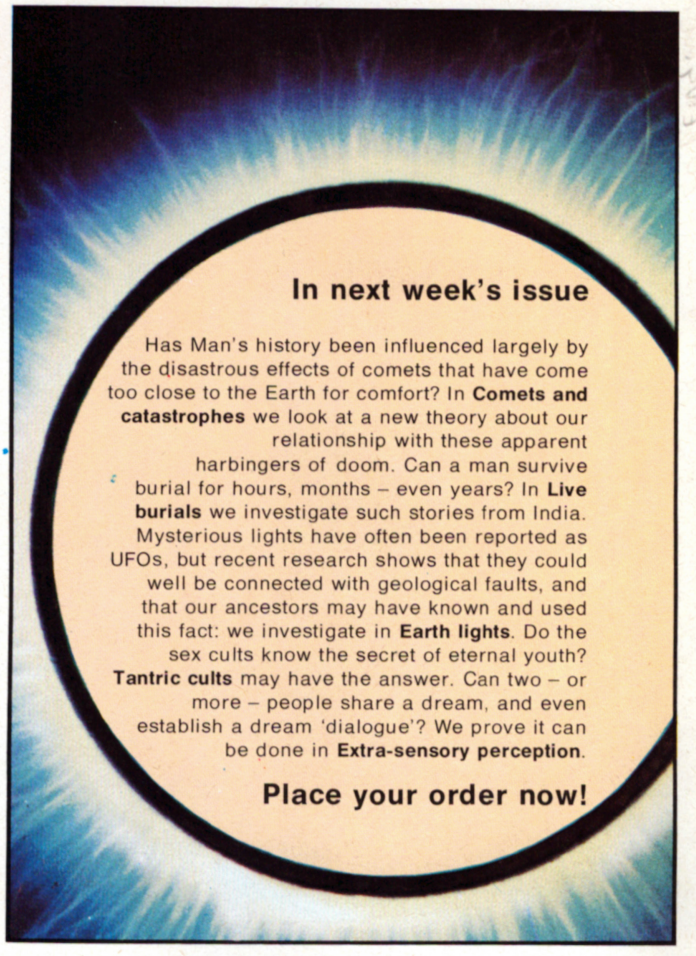
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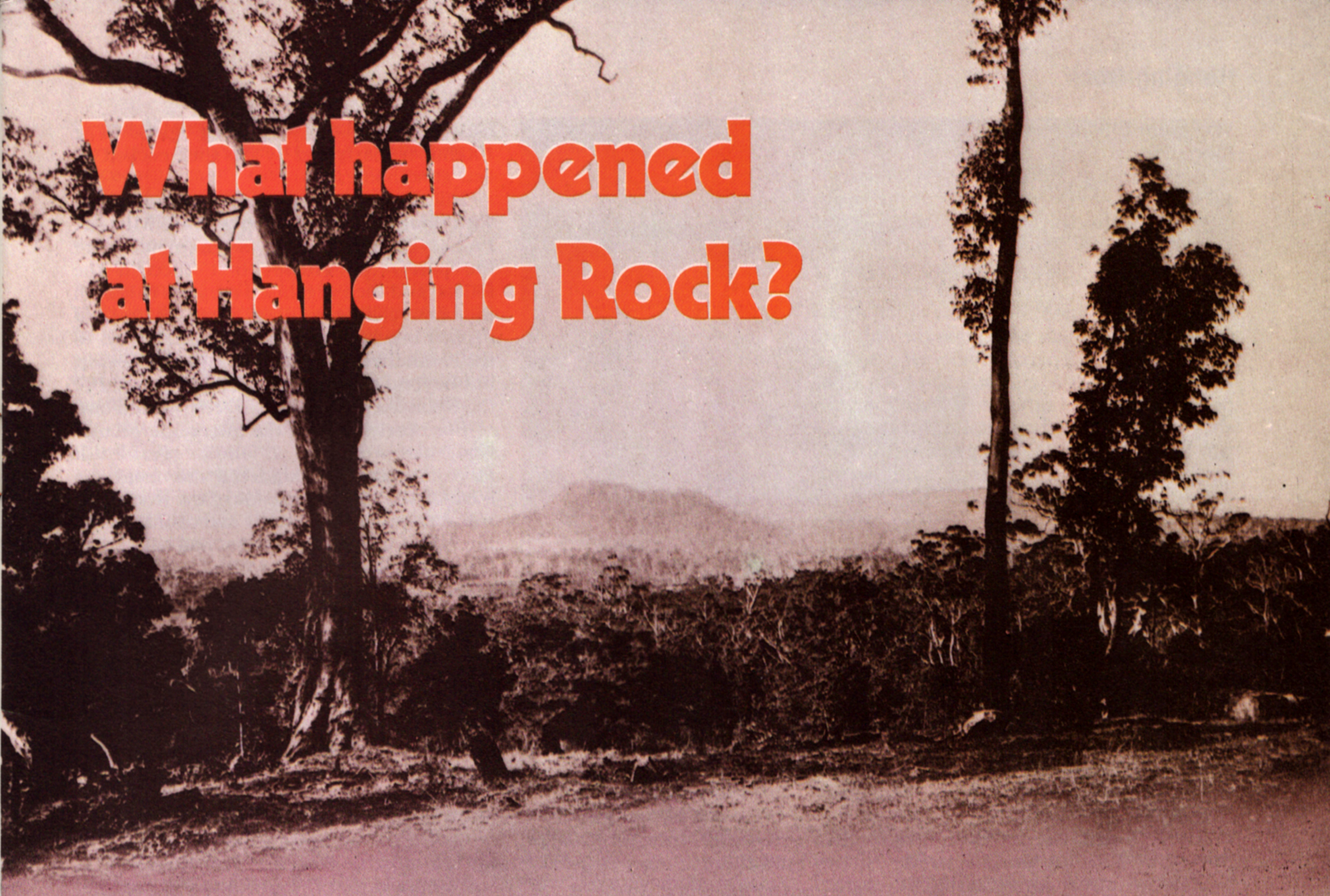
What happened at Hanging Rock?



The brooding Australian landscape, potent with ancient presences, was the backdrop for the mysterious disappearance of a school party in 1900. IAN KNIGHT and GRAHAM FULLER investigate this haunting legend

ST VALENTINE'S DAY 1900 dawned sunny and sparkling in the village of Woodend, near Melbourne in Australia. It was the day of the annual school outing at Applegate College on the outskirts of the village, and early in the morning a party of schoolgirls and teachers drove out with a picnic to a local beauty spot. By the end of the day four of them had disappeared: three of them were never to be seen again.

This strange story has become a *cause célèbre*, as mysterious as the case of the deserted ship, the *Mary Celeste* (see page 950). It has become the subject of countless theories, numerous magazine articles, at least two books and a feature film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). But like many historical mysteries the Hanging Rock affair is not all it seems.

The story has it that the party of girls and teachers set out in a hired coach to travel to Hanging Rock for their annual picnic treat. A popular place for picnickers at the turn of the century, Hanging Rock is an unusual geological formation. Of volcanic origin and several million years old, it rises majestically to 500 feet (150 metres) from an otherwise flat plain and terminates in a jumble of miraculously balancing boulders and monoliths that gave it its name. For sightseers a small picnic area had been laid out a short distance from the base of the rock, consisting of some makeshift stone tables and suitably discreet toilet facilities.

Above: immense and menacing, the prehistoric volcanic outcrop known as Hanging Rock dominates the surrounding plain like a massive ancient fortress and may be a focal point for paranormal forces. On the sacramental day of St Valentine, were the missing girls caught up by hidden powers and deflected into another dimension?

The party from the college comprised 19 girls, most of them in their teens, and two teachers. Mlle Diane de Poitiers, the younger of the two teachers, taught French and dancing, and Greta McCraw, a middle-aged Scottish spinster, was the maths mistress. The only other adult in the party was Ben Hussey, the coachmaster from the local livery stables. Mrs Appleyard, the headmistress, remained at the college.

The party set out early that Saturday morning to cover the 4½ miles (7 kilometres) to the picnic site, and arrived just before midday. It was a warm, sunny day, and after their picnic lunch most of the girls seem to have been content to doze under the shade of the trees and boulders. The only other party at the picnic area was encamped some distance away, on the far side of a small stream that ran down from the face of the Rock. This group consisted of Colonel Fitzhubert (formerly of the Indian Army, now retired to more mellow climes), Mrs Fitzhubert, their nephew the Hon. Michael Fitzhubert (on a

visit from England) and their groom Albert Crundall.

About 3 p.m. three of the senior girls asked permission from the French teacher to explore the Rock. The three girls – Irma Leopold, Marion Quade and a girl remembered simply as Miranda – were all aged 17 and known to be sensible and responsible. After some discussion with the other adults (during which it was noted that the only two watches with the party – belonging to Ben Hussey and Miss McCraw – had both stopped at noon) it was agreed to allow them to go ahead. As an afterthought Edith Horton, a younger girl aged 14, was given permission to accompany them. All four were warned not to go too far up the Rock, to be careful to avoid its crags, caves and precipices, and to look out for snakes, spiders and other potentially dangerous creepy-crawlies.

The girls walked away from the picnic ground, crossed the stream, and disappeared from sight at about 3.30 p.m. Michael Fitzhubert and Albert Crundall were sitting beside the stream and watched them cross; Irma was first, followed by Marion, Miranda and Edith. Albert let out a wolf-whistle, and Mike got to his feet with the intention of following the girls, but he gave up after only a few yards when they disappeared into a line of trees.

At the picnic site the rest of the school party dozed off. At about 4.30 Mr Hussey became anxious about gathering his charges together. He and Mlle de Poitiers discovered that Miss McCraw was now missing; no one had seen her go, but it was assumed that she had followed the exploring girls. The Fitzhubert party had by this time packed up and gone home.

Initially with irritation, and eventually with consternation, Hussey and Mlle de Poitiers searched for the absent members of the party. Mr Hussey first checked the toilets, and then organised the girls to search in pairs, calling as they went. A trail of broken bracken and disturbed scrub led to the southern face of the Rock from the east, but beyond that, where the stony ground of the Rock itself began, the traces petered out.

For nearly an hour the distraught picnickers searched; then at about 5.30 Edith Horton suddenly blundered out from the bush on the south-west side of the Rock. She was screaming hysterically and could tell her interrogators nothing of what had happened. Of Miranda, Irma, Marion and Miss McCraw there was no sign.

By now it was getting late and would soon be dark. Mr Hussey lit fires along the creek, and also continued to call out, and to beat upon two billy-cans with a crowbar. But with night-time coming on, the two adults eventually decided to gather up the remainder of their party and return to the college. On the way back they stopped at Woodend police station, where Mr Hussey made a statement to Constable Bumpher.

On the following day, Sunday, the search for the missing women began in earnest. It was assumed that the girls and their teacher had simply got lost in the bush, and the police enlisted the help of local volunteers, including Mike Fitzhubert and Albert

Below: Clyde School for girls, which moved from a Melbourne suburb to this building in Woodend in 1919, was the historical model for Appleyard College, described in Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) as a two-storey Italianate mansion built of solid Castlemaine stone

Crundall, to search the Rock. This was no easy task, since the Rock is a treacherous place, with many caves and pits (popularly believed at that time to be bottomless) hidden by rough bush. At the end of the first day's search, nothing had been found.

Meanwhile Woodend's Dr MacKenzie had examined Edith Horton. She appeared to be suffering from mild concussion, and had numerous scrapes, scratches and bruises acquired during her flight through the bush, but no other injuries. She could remember nothing of her time on the Rock. But later in the week, on Wednesday, she was interviewed by Constable Bumpher, when she made the almost casual revelation that on her way back she had passed Miss McCraw heading towards the Rock. Miss McCraw had been some way off, and had paid no attention to Edith's screams. Even worse, Edith bashfully confessed, the normally proper spinster had been improperly dressed; she had no skirt on, only her drawers.

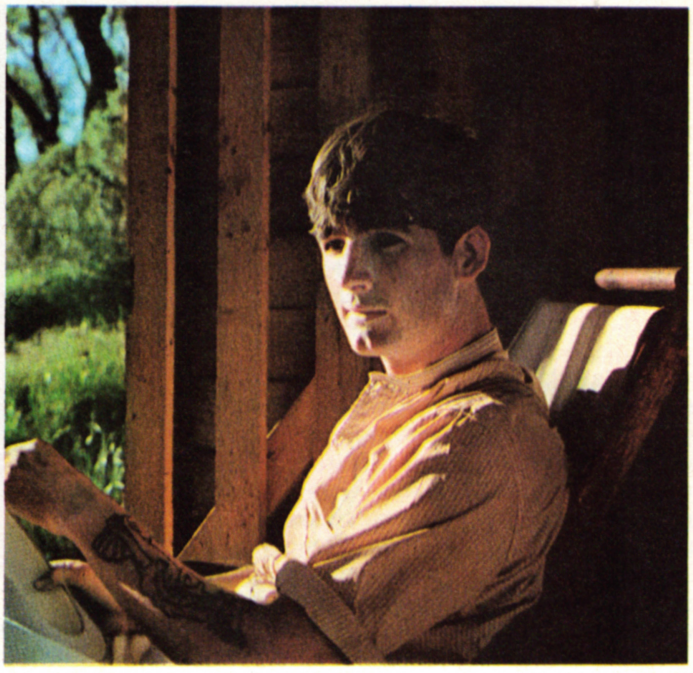
The search continued for several days, while the police systematically interviewed all the witnesses. Young Michael Fitzhubert seemed a prime suspect, if foul play was involved: he had been the last person to see the girls, and admitted to starting out to follow them. But there was no other indication that he might be responsible for the girls' disappearance and, possibly due to pressure from the influential Fitzhuberts, the police abandoned this line of enquiry.

On the Thursday following the picnic the police brought in an Aboriginal tracker and a bloodhound. Given Miss McCraw's scent from clothes left in her room, the bloodhound followed a trail up onto the Rock and stood bristling and growling for nearly 10 minutes on a circular platform halfway up. But it failed to find any tangible traces and, convinced that no one could have survived that long in the bush, the police called off the search.

The next day, Friday, Mike Fitzhubert and Albert Crundall decided to make a search of their own. At the end of the day, having found nothing, Mike decided to spend the night on the Rock. Albert returned to Colonel Fitzhubert's residence at Lake View to make Mike's excuses; the next

Above: the fateful picnic supposedly took place on St Valentine's Day 1900, and the college cook had, according to Joan Lindsay's account, made a 'handsome iced cake in the shape of a heart'. Unfortunately for the authenticity of the story, St Valentine's Day 1900 fell on a Wednesday not, as in the book, on a Saturday

Right: in a scene from the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) the schoolgirls from Appleyard College drink a toast to St Valentine against the threatening background of the primeval Rock. Within a few hours, three members of the party were to vanish for ever



Mike Fitzhubert (above left) and Albert Crundall (right), played by Dominic Guard and John Jarratt in the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). One theory to account for the girls' disappearance suggests that the young men may have kidnapped them for sexual purposes. Another theory is that the girls were captured by a UFO, for which the Rock may have acted as an intergalactic beacon like the Devil's Tower (below) in Wyoming in the film *Close encounters of the third kind* (1977)

morning, when he returned to the Rock, he followed Mike's trail and discovered him unconscious, suffering from exposure, and with a badly twisted ankle. Mike was carried home and treated by Dr MacKenzie; that night Albert found a hastily scribbled note in Mike's pocket which, though largely incoherent, suggested that Mike had found something on the Rock. On Sunday morning another search was made: to their astonishment, the searchers found Irma Leopold.

She was unconscious. She had several bruises and minor cuts to the head, and her fingernails were broken and torn, but otherwise she seemed to have suffered little as a result of spending over a week in the bush. Her shoeless feet were clean and unmarked. Most extraordinary of all, her corset was missing – but she had not been sexually assaulted. When she revived, she could remember nothing of her ordeal.

And there the story ends. Irma could tell nothing of what happened; Miranda, Marion and Miss McCraw were never seen again. As a result of the episode, pupils were removed from Appleyard College, which was forced to close. Some months later Mrs Appleyard drove out to Hanging Rock and climbed it alone. Her body was subsequently found at the foot of a precipice.

The mystery of Hanging Rock has given rise to endless speculation. For those disinclined to accept a paranormal explanation, there are two possibilities. The girls may simply have got lost and died on the Rock from exposure. Their bodies may have lain hidden in undergrowth at the foot of a cliff or in a cave where they had fallen until disposed of by animals, insects and bacteria (which happens in the Australian bush quite quickly). Edith's amnesia might have been due to hysteria or to a fall; Irma's might have been due to the traumatic experience of becoming separated from the others and surviving alone for a week. She may have removed her corset in order to move more freely (this could also be the reason Miss McCraw removed her skirt).

The second possibility is that the girls were the victims of some crime. A theory has been put forward that Mike Fitzhubert and Albert Crundall might have kidnapped the girls (after murdering Miss McCraw) and held them hidden on the Colonel's estate to gratify their sexual desires. Marion and Miranda either died eventually of their injuries, or were murdered; Irma was saved through some chance. If the motive was sexual, then it has been suggested that Mike may have been a 'remittance man' sent to the colonies to keep him out of the way. It may be tempting to think of Mike as a pervert, but

the whole theory falls apart when confronted with Irma's surviving virginity.

Other theories are less earth-bound. It has been suggested that the girls were spirited away by some alien spacecraft. Certainly the Rock itself is distinctive enough – for those inclined to the idea – to serve as some intergalactic beacon, like the Devil's Tower in the film *Close encounters of the third kind* (1977). The presence of a UFO might explain why the watches stopped. When recounting how she had seen Miss McCraw, Edith Horton said she had seen a strange pink cloud around that time: is this evidence of mysterious goings-on in the sky?

Another theory is that the girls slipped into some kind of time travel, emerging in some other time past or future. This theory makes much of the strange pink cloud: both Christian Doppler and Albert Einstein suggested that bodies departing from sight at unnaturally high speed would be seen through a 'red shift' – a distortion of the light spectrum. The pink cloud might have been Miss McCraw disappearing at high speed as a time traveller.

Other ideas are that the girls crossed into a parallel universe; or that the primeval qualities in the Rock itself spirited the victims away, a theory apparently favoured by the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, with its oppressive vision of the Australian landscape, and its positing of the Rock as a giant phallic symbol.

So what exactly did happen on that long-ago St Valentine's Day? Sad to relate, there is no concrete evidence that the disappearances ever took place at all.

Below: the forbidding, jagged crags of Hanging Rock were to claim yet another victim when, according to the novel and the film, Mrs Appleyard, the headmistress of the girls' college, drove out alone to the Rock and threw herself from its heights

Fact or fiction?

Much of the Hanging Rock story is based on Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967). Although this is a work of fiction, the author obviously hopes her readers will take it to be based on fact. In the preface she says, 'Whether . . . fact or fiction, my readers must decide for themselves.' At the end of the book there is a long quotation, apparently taken from a Melbourne newspaper, describing the outline of the story. Circumstantial evidence has also contrived to mislead recent investigators. All the places mentioned in the story exist, including a Ladies' College at Woodend. The Hussey brothers did run a store near Woodend, and a Dr MacKenzie did practise in the vicinity at the turn of the century. But no contemporary references to the disappearances can be traced.

In fact St Valentine's Day 1900 fell on a Wednesday, not a Saturday. The girls' school (named Clyde College) was opened in 1910 in a Melbourne suburb, and did not move to Woodend until 1919. Neither the local newspaper, the *Woodend Star*, nor the two Melbourne papers, the *Age* and the *Argus*, refer to any disappearances on the Rock during February 1900, nor for several years before or after. The newspaper quoted at the end of the novel suggests that Irma gave several interviews to the Society for Psychical Research; these cannot be traced, nor can the newspaper from which the extract was supposedly taken.

Confronted with this lack of extraneous evidence, Joan Lindsay remains mischievously enigmatic. In an interview with a Melbourne newspaper in 1977 she was asked outright, 'Is *Picnic* fact or fiction?' 'It is an impossible question for me to answer,' she replied. 'Fact and fiction are so closely intertwined.'

Yet it hardly seems to matter whether the story is true or not. It already appears to have passed into modern mythology. People who have read the book or seen the film will assure you that the events described really happened. It seems that the tale has connected powerfully with the Australian collective unconscious; and its characters are already certain of the immortality conferred on the figures in a fairytale.

Curse of the Hexham heads

The discovery of two carved stone heads in a Hexham back garden seemed, at first, unremarkable enough. But when the heads apparently triggered terrifying appearances of a wolf-man, the nightmare began. PAUL SCREETON tells the story

ONE AFTERNOON in February 1972, 11-year-old Colin Robson was weeding the garden of his family's council house in Rede Avenue, Hexham, a market town 20 miles (32 kilometres) west along the Tyne valley from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, when he uncovered what appeared to be a lump of stone about the size of a tennis ball, with a strange conical protrusion on one side. Clearing the earth from the object, he found that it was roughly carved with human features, and that the conical protrusion was actually a neck.

Excited by the find, he called to his younger brother Leslie, who was watching from an upstairs window. The boys continued to dig – and soon Leslie had uncovered a second head.

The stones, which soon became known as the Hexham heads, appeared to be representatives of two distinct types. The first had a skull-like face, and seemed to everyone who saw it to be masculine; it was dubbed the 'boy'. It was of a greenish-grey colour, and glistened with crystals of quartz. It was very heavy – heavier than cement or concrete. The hair appeared to be in stripes running from the front to the back of the head. The other head – the 'girl' – resembled a witch, with wildly bulging eyes and hair that was combed backwards off the forehead in what was almost a bun. There were traces of a yellow or red pigment in her hair.

After the heads had been unearthed, the boys took them inside the house. It was then that the strange happenings began. The heads would turn round spontaneously, objects were broken for no apparent reason – and when the mattress on the bed of one of the Robson daughters was showered with glass, both girls moved out of their room. Meanwhile, at the spot at which the heads were found, a strange flower bloomed at Christmas and an eerie light glowed.

The back garden of a council house in a small town in northern England hardly seems a likely place for a controversy about the paranormal to start. But it was in this garden in Hexham (below left) that, in 1971, two small boys unearthed a pair of crudely carved stone heads that apparently carried some ancient curse. A distinguished archaeologist suggested that they were around 1800 years old, and designed to play a part in Celtic head rituals – but Desmond Craigie (left) claims that he made them in the 1950s

It could be argued that the events in the Robson household had nothing to do with the appearance of the heads – that they were, instead, poltergeist phenomena triggered by the adolescent children of the Robson family. But the Robsons' next door neighbour, a Mrs Ellen Dodd, underwent a truly unnerving experience that could clearly not be explained away so easily:

> I had gone into the children's bedroom to sleep with one of them, who was ill. My ten-year-old son Brian kept telling me he felt something touching him. I told him not to be so silly. Then I saw this shape. It came towards me

and I definitely felt it touch me on the legs. Then, on all fours, it moved out of the room.

Mrs Dodd later described the creature that had touched her as 'half human, half sheep-like'. Mrs Robson recalled that she heard a sound like a crash and screams next door on the night in question. Her neighbour told her that the creature that made them was like a werewolf. And when Mrs Dodd went downstairs she found, disconcertingly, that her front door was open. Whatever caused the phenomenon, Mrs Dodd was terrified, and was rehoused by the local council after she had told them of her experience. Eventually the heads were removed from the Robsons' house, the house itself was exorcised, and all was quiet in Rede Avenue.

Top: this photograph of the Hexham heads is the best now available. A comparison with heads that are known to be modern reveals striking similarities (above). The head on the left was made by Desmond Craigie in an attempt to prove that he made the original heads; the one on the right, curiously enough, was made shortly before the discovery of the Hexham heads by one of the small boys who unearthed them

Left: the figure of the wolf-man, which appears in legends throughout the world. The mere presence of the Hexham heads was reportedly able to induce manifestations of such creatures

Meanwhile, however, a distinguished Celtic scholar, Dr Anne Ross, had become interested in the stones. In an article for *Folklore, myths and legends of Britain*, a book published by Reader's Digest, Dr Ross had claimed that the heads were around 1800 years old and had been designed to play a part in Celtic head rituals (see box). And, when the heads were banished from the Robsons' house, Dr Ross took charge of them. She recalls what happened next:

I didn't connect it with the heads then. We always keep the hall light on and the doors kept open because our small son is a bit frightened of the dark, so there's always a certain amount of light coming into our room, and I woke up and felt extremely frightened. In fact, panic-stricken and terribly, terribly cold. There was a sort of dreadful atmosphere of icy coldness all around me. Something made me look towards the door, and as I looked, I saw this thing going out of it.

It was about six feet [2 metres] high, slightly stooping, and it was black against the white door. It was half-animal and half-man. The upper part I would have said was wolf and the lower part was human. It was covered with a kind of black, very dark fur. It went out and I just saw it clearly and then it disappeared and something made me run after it – a thing I wouldn't normally have done, but I felt compelled to run after it. I got out of bed and I ran and I could hear it going down the stairs. Then it disappeared toward the back of the house. When I got to the bottom of the stairs I was terrified.

That, however, was not the end of the story. A few days later, Dr Ross and her husband arrived home from London one evening to find their teenage daughter in a state of shock. Dr Ross described her daughter's experience:

She had opened the front door and a black thing, which she described as near a were-wolf as anything, jumped

over the bannister and landed with a kind of plop. It padded with heavy animal feet, and it rushed toward the back of the house and she felt compelled to follow it. It disappeared in the music room, right at the end of the corridor, and when she got there it had gone. Suddenly she was terrified.

The day the heads were removed from the house everybody, including my husband, said it's as if a cloud had lifted; and since then there hasn't been, really, a trace of it [the paranormal activity].

Before the heads were removed, however, there were a number of manifestations of the unwelcome 'lodger'. During those frightening months, Dr Ross insisted, the creature appeared to be very real. It was not something shadowy, or only glimpsed out of the corner of the eye. It was noisy, and everyone who came to the house commented on a definite presence of evil. While he never observed it directly, Dr Ross's archaeologist husband was fully aware of his unwelcome 'guest's' presence, although he is not usually sensitive to psychic phenomena. The phenomena eventually ceased after the heads had been removed and the house exorcised – but not before Dr Ross had disposed of her entire collection of Celtic heads.

What was the origin of the heads? Were they, as Dr Ross believed, Celtic – and somehow imbued with an ancient curse?

Below: the complex but ordered shape of copper sulphate crystals reflects the regularity of its subatomic structure. Dr Don Robins (below right), an inorganic chemist and one of the many people to experience the disquieting effect of the Hexham heads, believes that crystal structures can store information in the form of electrical energy. The Hexham heads contain a high proportion of quartz – a crystalline substance; and Robins explains their apparent ability to induce paranormal effects by suggesting that they derive from the place in which the heads were made

The story took on a new twist in 1972 when Desmond Craigie – then a truck driver – announced that the 'Celtic' heads were actually a mere 16 years old. They had not been fashioned as votive offerings by a head-hunting Celt – for, Mr Craigie claimed, he himself had made them as toys for his daughter Nancy.

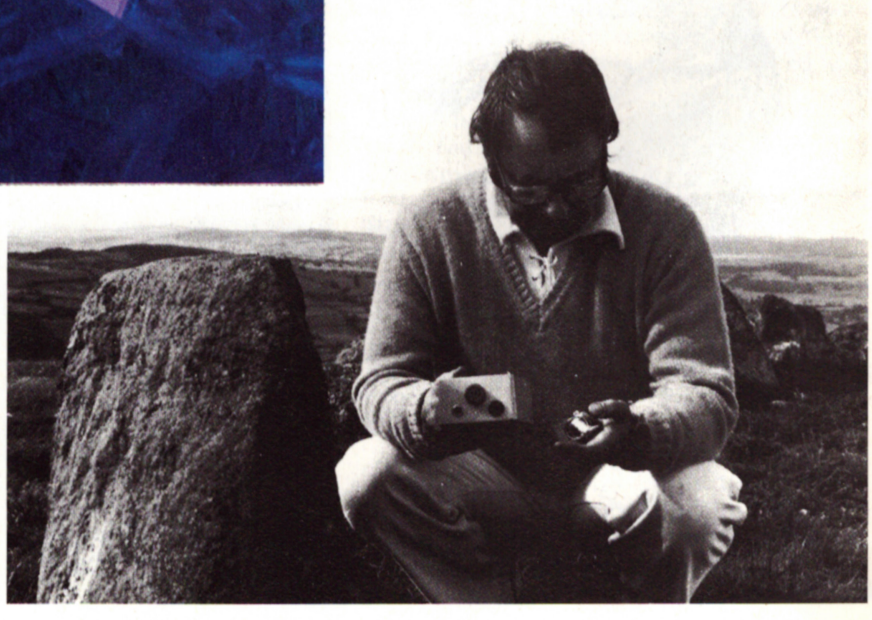
He explained that he had lived in the house in Rede Avenue that was now the Robsons' home for around 30 years; indeed, his father had remained a tenant there until the previous year. One day, his daughter Nancy had asked him what he did for a living. At that time Mr Craigie worked with artificial cast stone, making objects such as concrete pillars. To explain to his daughter what he did at work, he made three heads for her in his lunch break, and took them home for her to play with.

'Nancy played with them as dolls,' he said. 'She would use the silver paper from Penguin chocolate biscuits as eyes. One got broken and I threw it in the bin. The others just got kicked around and must have landed up where the lads found them.'

Embarrassed by the publicity that his own handiwork had attracted, Desmond Craigie said he was concerned merely to set the record straight. Speaking of the heads, he said, 'To say that they were old would be conning people.' But Dr Ross was not entirely convinced. 'Mr Craigie's claim is an interesting story. . . . Unless Mr Craigie was familiar with genuine Celtic stone heads it would be extraordinary for him to make them like this. They are not crude by any means.' Scientific analysis has, surprisingly, been unable to determine the age of the heads.

Bearers of an ancient curse

If the heads are indeed Celtic it is easy to imagine that they may be the carriers of some ancient curse. But if they are not, why is it that they appear to provoke paranormal phenomena? The evidence that they do so is strengthened by the testimony of another scientist, an inorganic chemist named Dr Don Robins. Dr Robins was exploring the idea that mineral artefacts can store visual images of the people who made them. He suggests that places and objects can store information that causes specific phenomena to occur – an idea similar to Tom Lethbridge's notion that events can be 'tape-recorded' into the surrounding in which they



Two heads are better?

Hundreds of stone heads have been found in the north of England, Scotland and in mainland Europe. Most of these primitively carved objects can be positively identified as dating from the pre-Roman Celtic period – but some of them are of more mysterious provenance.

The Celts of the kingdom of Brigantia, in north-east England, were among those who revered the human head both as a charm against evil and as a fertility symbol. They would set the severed heads of vanquished enemies over the doors of houses and barns. Historians believe that it is an echo of this gruesome cult that lies at the heart of the veneration of stone heads (left) practised by later Celts.

West Yorkshire is particularly rich in such heads. Many are mounted in the walls of buildings, by doorways or on gables, or close to wells, where they seem to be serving their original purpose of warding off evil. But the curious thing is that many of these relics of the Celts' grisly cult are no more than a century old. Consciously or unconsciously, Yorkshire men and women have been perpetuating a tradition that is more than two thousand years old.

take place (see page 568). Robins believes, too, that certain minerals have a natural capacity to store information in the form of electrical energy encoded in the lattice structure of their crystals. Summing up the argument, Dr Robins states:

> The structure of a mineral can be seen as a fluctuating energy network with infinite possibilities of storage and transformation of electronic information. These new dimensions in physical structure may well point the way, eventually, to an understanding of kinetic imagery encoded in stone.

He was interested, too, in the reports of sounds that had allegedly accompanied the phenomena induced by the presence of the heads, and drew a tentative parallel with a creature from Norse mythology, called the wulver, powerful and dangerous, but well-disposed towards mankind unless provoked. There are several reports of sightings of this creature in the Shetlands in the 20th century.

Dr Robins's interest in the heads prompted him to agree to take charge of them. As he put them in his car to take them home, however, and turned on the ignition, all the dashboard electrics went dead. He looked at the heads, told them firmly to 'Stop it!' – and the car started!

Back at his own home, Dr Robins in his turn began to find the presence of the heads disquieting. He described his reactions:

> There was no doubt that any influence that the heads possessed came from the girl. I felt most uncomfortable sitting there with them looking at me and eventually we turned them round. As we did so, I had the distinct impression that the girl's eyes 'slid round' watching me.

Perhaps disappointingly, however, Dr Robins did not witness any paranormal events that might be caused by the heads. There were, however, some disquieting moments. One day, leaving the house, he muttered to the heads 'Let's see something when I get back!' Moments later, he re-entered the house to collect a book he had forgotten. Outside it was fresh and blustery – but in his study the atmosphere seemed 'almost electric with a stifling, breathless quality'. Attributing the effect to the 'girl' head, he left hurriedly. He found nothing amiss on his return home.

The present whereabouts of the Hexham heads is not known. But there seems little reason to doubt that they really did produce phenomena similar to those classically attributed to poltergeists – that, somehow they acted as epicentres. But why? There remains the mystery of their age – are they Celtic, as Dr Ross maintains, or were they really made in 1956 by a Hexham man for his daughter? Dr Robins's theory is that the power of an artefact to produce poltergeist phenomena depends, not on the maker, but upon *where* it was made. This may eventually throw some light on the Hexham heads; but clearly, there remain many questions to be answered.

Secrets of the sex cults

Is the cult of Tantra simply an excuse for sexual excesses, as is charged by its critics? Or are its sexual rituals the key to ultimate spiritual salvation, as the practitioners themselves maintain? KENNETH RAYNER JOHNSON weighs up the evidence

Above left: Shiva, the major male god of Tantra, dancing upon a dwarf demon and encircled by symbols of creation, destruction and rebirth. Tantrism has a whole pantheon of deities and a complex ideology of spiritual fulfilment

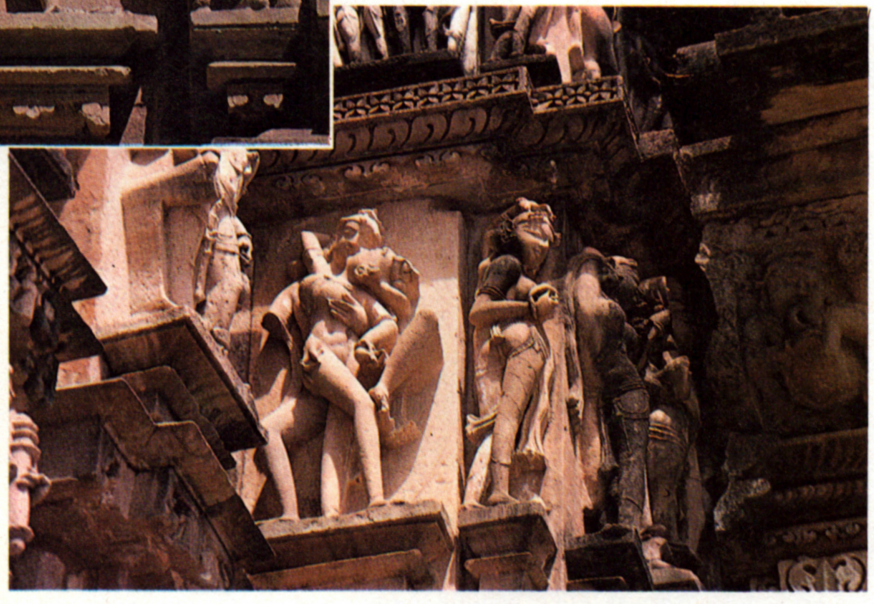
THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE is in perfect equilibrium, its two primary polarities precisely balanced – like a god and goddess locked together in divine and intimate union. The highest spiritual goal, therefore, is to attain resonance with that unsurpassable state – through sexual rituals.

So say the followers of Tantra, a cult that originated in the ancient East and that has enjoyed popularity among Western occultists and mystics since at least the end of the 19th century. This cult continues to flourish – largely in secret – in modern-day society.

To the outsider, its rites may seem nothing more than an indulgence in promiscuous and apparently obscene sex. Even worse, perhaps, the rituals seem to smack of utter depravity and black magic. But in its purest sense, Tantrism is nothing of the kind. Tantra, from which the cult's name is derived, is a Sanskrit word meaning 'warp'. It signifies a body of written teaching – the warp – through which are threaded the supplementary oral and physical training and preparation – the weft – needed for the attainment of the personal and direct experience of God, the gods, the Universal Essence, the Ultimate – however the seeker after wisdom and salvation chooses to envisage this awesome goal.

In fact, the sexually explicit, erotic and, to some, disgusting aspects of Tantric rites take up only a small percentage of the entire written texts. Yet it is probably true to say that these practices, and the powers they are supposed to confer, are the main factor in the cult's appeal to Westerners.

Tantrism has almost always been practised in secret. And, in spite of the increased sexual freedom and permissiveness of the late 20th century, it is still a secret cult. Although the oldest texts date back to only around the end of the 10th century, it is said that there were many more ancient ones, which were destroyed by successive invaders of the Indus Valley and by orthodox Hindus



Top and above: erotic sculptures on the Khajuraho temple in India. Despite such open display in art, Tantrics have nearly always practised their sexual rites in secret to escape persecution

who tried to stamp out Tantra. Libraries of Tantric scripts were burned, the cult's monasteries were razed and priests were put to death. Not surprisingly, surviving teachers and followers went into hiding. Tantra, however, has much in it besides the sexual practices that offended the persecutors and appals modern critics.

In Tantric philosophy, the two major gods, who personify the balanced polarities of the cosmos, are Shiva and his consort Shakti. But it is the female, Shakti, who is regarded as the superior of the two because she is seen as the primal, creative, active force – the Mother Goddess, Great Mother or Great Goddess. The Tantrics have no caste system, consider women completely equal to men and, in many rites, envisage the female partner as the physical vehicle of the goddess Shakti herself.

The range of subjects that Tantrism treats is so broad that it covers almost all areas of occult philosophy. These include the creation and ultimate destruction of the world; an entire pantheon of deities and their inner meaning and symbolism; yoga and meditation; astral travel and heightened consciousness; prolonged longevity – and, of course, the sexual rites by which, it is believed, many powers and profound insights may be obtained. More than one commentator has noted that the medieval grimoires and rituals of Western magic and sorcery seem to have been borrowed from Eastern Tantrism and dressed up in Western trappings.

Long and difficult periods of preparation and training are essential for any form of attainment in the Tantric system. There are complex breathing exercises, gestures and postures designed to lead to the control of body temperature, pulse rate and other automatic physical functions. Intense and profound mental exercises are performed, calculated to give the true will total control.

The successful adepts should ultimately be raised mentally, bodily and spiritually to attune their highest, inner essence to the very Quintessence of the Universal Spirit. This is often a religious goal, but there are many who would insist that Tantra is not a true religion.

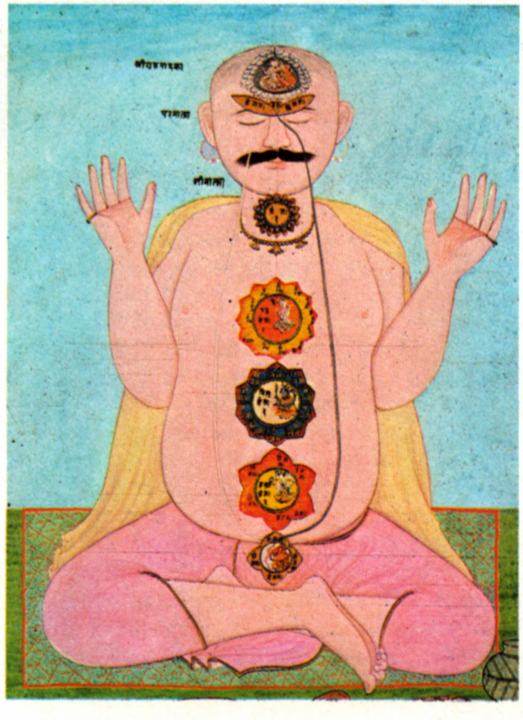
The texts that describe the necessary techniques of Tantra are couched in highly allegorical and abstruse symbolism, designed to veil the inner meaning. The sections dealing with spiritual alchemy, for example, at first sight appear to be describing nothing more than the physical effort of attempting to transmute base metals into gold. But they are intended to be applied internally.

Internal alchemy

Shakti-yoga is the key to the real alchemical process indicated, and its exercises are based on the concept of the *chakras*, which might be defined as centres. Another name used almost synonymously with chakras is *padmas*, meaning 'lotuses'. Chakras are said to be located inside the body, but are not envisaged as physical organs. Rather they are subtle physical centres of energy, located at the plexuses (nerve centres) of the body.

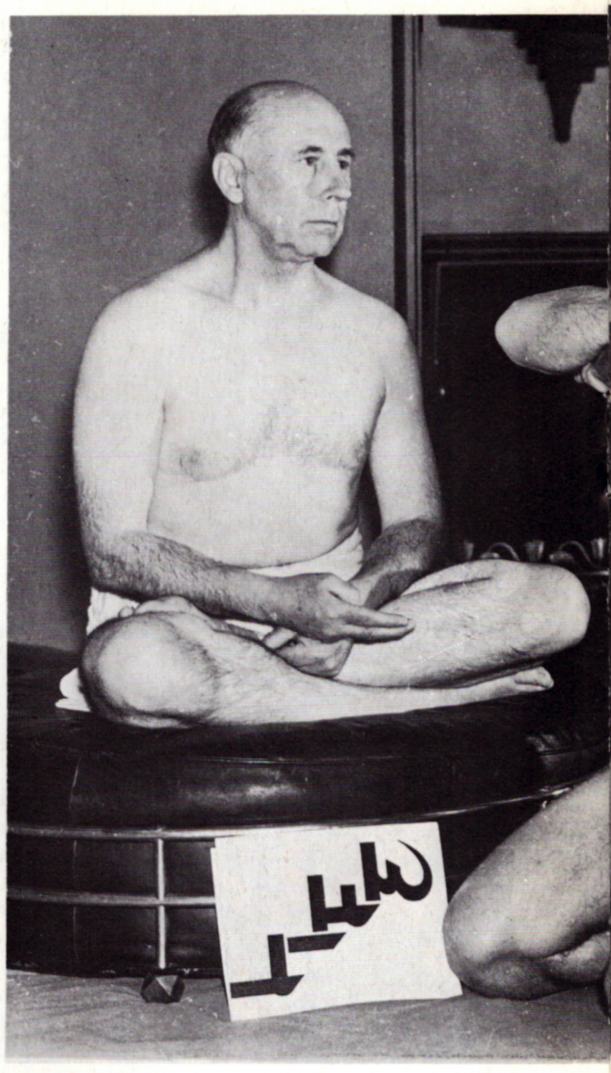
There are seven major chakras. The lowest of these is the *muladhara*, which is said to lie near the base of the spine. It is here that the feminine, active principle, the goddess Shakti herself, lies dormant. She is symbolised as a sleeping serpent, the *kundalini* – from *kundala* meaning 'coiled' – and she waits to be awakened and eventually conjoined with Shiva, the male, passive principle.

Shiva, meanwhile, supposedly inhabits the *sahasrara* chakra – the 'thousand-petalled lotus' – in the crown of the head. The way to bring these deities together, say the Tantrics, is to awaken Shakti and cause



Right: the seven chakras (centres of energy), in a 19th-century drawing. The lowest chakra is at the base of the spine, where lies the kundalini, a snake symbolic of the goddess Shakti. Tantrics seek to awaken her and make her move up the body to the god Shiva, the highest chakra in the crown of the head. When this 'divine union' takes place, the Tantric has achieved his final goal – which takes years of rigorous training

Above: a Tibetan bronze of the god Hevajra with his goddess Shakti. According to Tantric belief, such divine union keeps the Universe in perfect balance, and the cult's sexual rituals aim to bring the cultists in resonance with this divine equilibrium



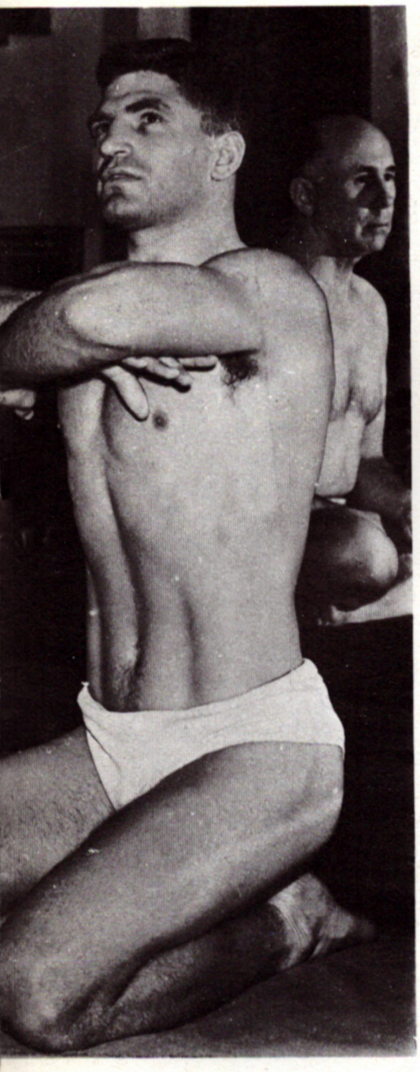
her to move gradually up through the five intervening chakras. These are: the *svadhisthana*, above the genital region; the *manipura*, near the navel; the *anahata*, in the heart area; the *akasa*, in the throat; and the *ajna*, somewhere in the region of the pineal gland. This last is the so-called 'third eye', beloved of Eastern and Western mystics alike as an organ of occult vision.

When the kundalini has reached the seventh chakra, Shakti and Shiva are united. The successful adept is then perfectly attuned to the Universe itself. This puts the enlightened one in a superior position to the rest of 'unawakened' mankind, leading as it does to the highest order of wisdom and power. The successful Tantric is, in fact, a part of – and able to manipulate at will – any segment or entity of the entire cosmos. It is a case of salvation through sex.

But there are many pitfalls in this long, complex and arduous process of Tantric enlightenment and, if not undertaken properly with the aid of a knowledgeable master, its dangers are very real. It is said that if the kundalini force, which is likened to a kind of occult fire, gets out of control, madness or death can result.

Another of the dangers along the way is that aspirants could be diverted by mundane desires, born of their weaknesses and fanned by some of their achievements. The desire for wealth, longevity, power over others, to name a few, may seduce them away from the ultimate goal of divine union. The sexual rites themselves, if not undertaken in the spirit of discipline that is intended, can obsess the practitioner to the point of bodily and mental collapse.

These rites – the target of the severest external criticism – involve nudity, group sex, incest and adultery. But although Tantrism has been described as a cult of ecstasy, it is not merely physical, sensual ecstasy that is paramount. Tantric rituals are deliberately designed to make the selection of a partner arbitrary. There is no emphasis on youth or beauty or mutual attraction.



Above: Lou Nova (right), a boxing champion preparing for a major fight in 1939, taking muscle control instructions from Oom the Omnipotent, founder of an American cult with roots in Tantrism. Oom had a wealthy patron who established a permanent home for the cult in Nyack, New York

Right: a 17th-century Tibetan cloth painting of the Tantric Buddhas, including the Knowledge Holder, the Peaceful Buddhas, the Wrathful Buddhas and those presiding over the realms of reincarnation

At higher levels of attainment, there are even claims of sexual intercourse with goddesses, elementals and female demons. One testimony to this has come from Stephen Jenkins, an English history teacher who was initiated into Tantric sexual ritual in Mongolia. In his book *The undiscovered country* (1977), Jenkins explains that there are two stages in advanced Tantrism, one in which the female partner is an ordinary human being, and another in which she is 'a being of another order altogether'. The latter, he says, can take the form either of a 'skywalker' – spirits said to haunt western India and Ladak – or even of the Great Goddess Shakti herself: 'At the highest level of this particular method, the experience is indistinguishable from normal human intercourse at its intensest and most refined. I do not pretend to know how this works: I can only testify that it does.'

Two paths, one goal

It should be noted here that there are two different schools of Tantric sexual rites, known as the Right-Hand and Left-Hand Paths. It is believed that many of the cults that flourish secretly in the West today adhere to the Left-Hand Path. In Tantrism, this simply means that in rites involving actual physical sex, the prospective female partners sit on the left-hand side of the male practitioners as the rite begins. In the Right-Hand Path, the sexual rites are purely symbolic.

Francis King, an historian of ritual magic, wrote in *Sexuality, magic and perversion* (1971) that Edward Sellon (1818–1886) introduced Tantrism to Britain, although a few English and French academics had shown an interest in Hindu sex religion in the 18th century. Sellon – soldier, fencing master and pornographer – became acquainted with Tantric sexual rites in India, and his *Annotations on the sacred writings of the Hindus* appeared in 1865.

In the United States, possibly the first person to study and practise a form of sexual magic with some Tantric links was Paschal Beverley Randolph (1825–1871). He established various secret groups, one of which is believed to survive in France today. Like some Bengali practitioners of Tantra, Randolph used hallucinogenic drugs in his rites to attain heightened states of consciousness.

Another cult with distinctly Tantric overtones emerged in New York around 1919 under the name of the Brae Burn Club. It was headed by Pierre Bernard, who styled himself 'Oom the Omnipotent', and his wife, one 'Mademoiselle de Vries', a vaudeville dancer whom he had taught oriental dancing and the basics of Tantrism. Mlle de Vries also promoted a 'health system of Tantrism', attracting a succession of society people. Among these was a Vanderbilt, whose family was one of the wealthiest in the country. It was she who arranged for the Bernards to buy a mansion and estate at Nyack, New York, as a permanent home for the cult.

The inner sanctum of this club was the 'Secret Order of Tantrics', whose members came to regard Bernard as a kind of man-god. Bernard and his wife aimed 'to teach men and women to love, and make women feel like queens' – a clear echo of the Tantric belief in the superiority of Shakti. One Tantric aphorism actually says: 'Shiva without Shakti is a corpse.'

Other occult groups had already adopted some of the sex magic associated with Tantra. During the late 19th century, Karl Kellner, a wealthy German industrialist, had established an occult order based upon the sex magic he claimed he had learned while travelling in the East. This group developed into the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), branches of which spread throughout Europe and parts of Scandinavia. Aleister Crowley (see page 2081) became the leader of the British OTO in 1922, but he moved away from Tantric ideas and introduced elements such as 'magical masturbation' and homosexuality, and added degrees of adeptness of his own invention. He also used sex magic for temporal gain, which was not commensurate with Tantric teaching.

However, branches of the OTO continued to be established – and many still exist today, in the USA as well as Europe: evidence that links with Tantric sexual ritual have survived into the late 20th century.

Can the sex magic of secret cults stay the ageing process? See page 2355

Countdown to the End

An incredible event will herald the coming of the Millennium – the physical disappearance of millions of true Christians. KENNETH McCLURE scrutinises this scriptural prophecy and others equally extraordinary

MANKIND HAS ALWAYS BEEN OBSESSED with predictions that the world is about to end. From sources as diverse as the instinctive premonitions of utter disaster prompted by comets and eclipses, to the most complex of linguistic and mathematical interpretations of biblical prophecy and the bumps in the passages of the Great Pyramid, much time, effort and emotion have been devoted to this single tantalising subject.

Before 1945 it was possible to conceive of the end only as being the result of cataclysmic natural disaster or direct divine intervention. Now we can annihilate ourselves, and biblical prophecy, as well as prophecies derived from the various visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, have been adapted accordingly. In a strange way Man, Christ and Antichrist are expected to co-operate in bringing about the worst and best of times: the Tribulation and the Millennium.

Certain fundamentalist Christians predict that within the next few years the 'Rapture' will occur (below): Christ will appear in the air, the faithful will be drawn up to him, and all human affairs will be left in sorry confusion. For those who are left, years of devastating war and natural disaster will follow, of which the sufferings of Kampuchea and its capital Phnom Penh (bottom) are but a mild foretaste

It is really too simple just to talk about the end as if in one fell swoop we will all be cleared away, sorted into good and bad, and disposed of accordingly to heaven or hell. It is said that for the majority of us, at least, there is a minimum of seven dreadful years ahead; at least, it is said by most of the prophetic writers and interpreters on both sides of the Atlantic. Let us look at what is promised us in those seven years, and what may await us if by chance we survive them.

Reading publications such as *The Unexplained* probably makes one part of the 'occult revival', much dreaded by most of the modern prophets as one of the signs of the end. As the 'occult' is regarded as the work of Satan the readers of *The Unexplained* are not likely to avoid the worst; this writer probably does not stand a chance. However, it is widely accepted by the prophets that a substantial proportion of humanity – probably a minimum of 144,000 – *will* avoid the worst. It is said that they will suddenly, without warning, disappear from the Earth.

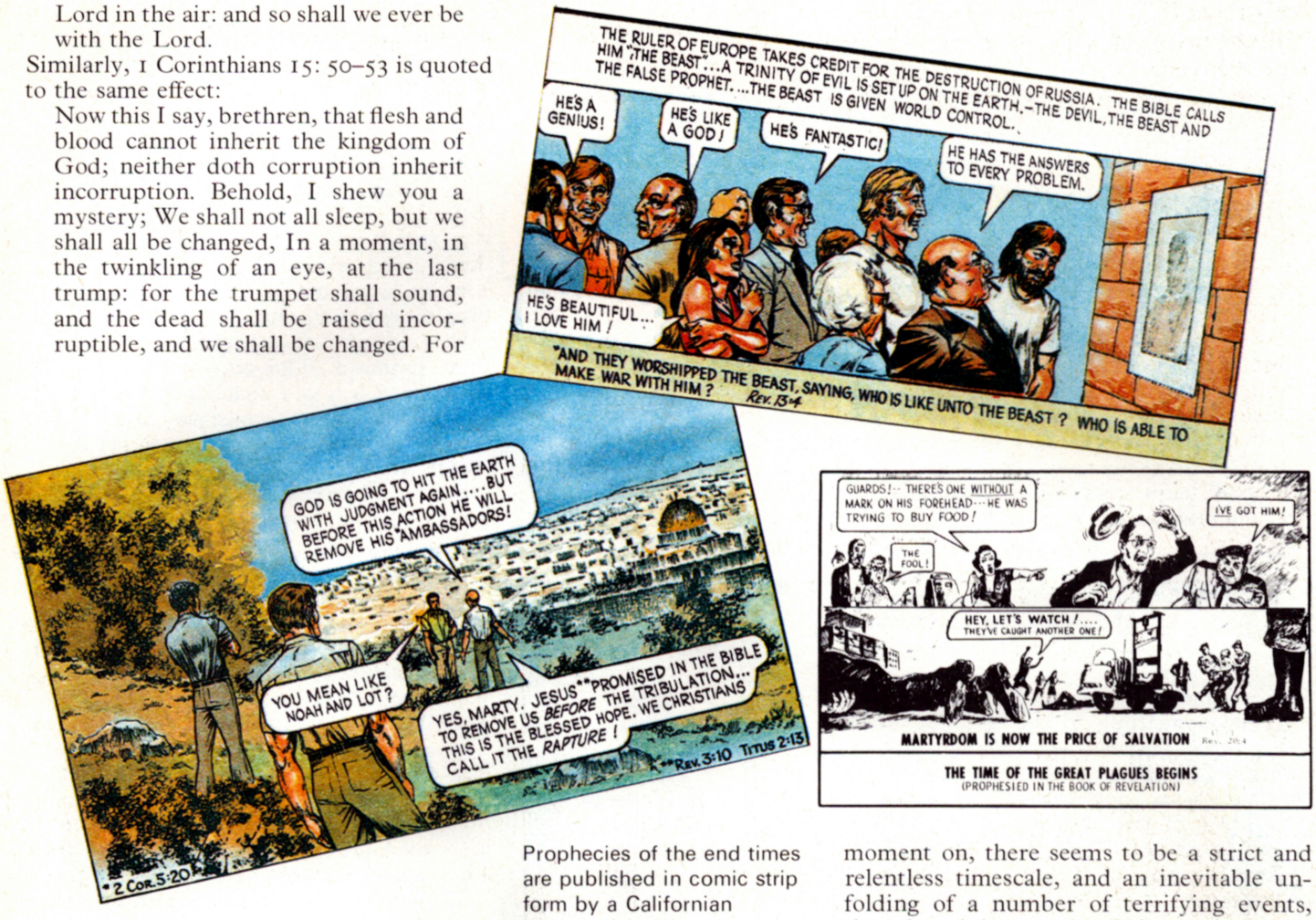
This event, known most commonly as 'the Rapture' – a word originally meaning 'act of transporting', in either body or spirit – is predicted from a number of specific passages in the Bible; the most important is 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17:

> For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the

Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Similarly, 1 Corinthians 15: 50–53 is quoted to the same effect:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.


THE RULER OF EUROPE TAKES CREDIT FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF RUSSIA. THE BIBLE CALLS HIM "THE BEAST"...A TRINITY OF EVIL IS SET UP ON THE EARTH.–THE DEVIL, THE BEAST AND THE FALSE PROPHET....THE BEAST IS GIVEN WORLD CONTROL..
HE'S A GENIUS!
HE'S LIKE A GOD!
HE'S FANTASTIC!
HE HAS THE ANSWERS TO EVERY PROBLEM.
HE'S BEAUTIFUL... I LOVE HIM!
"AND THEY WORSHIPPED THE BEAST, SAYING, WHO IS LIKE UNTO THE BEAST? WHO IS ABLE TO MAKE WAR WITH HIM? Rev. 13:4
GOD IS GOING TO HIT THE EARTH WITH JUDGMENT AGAIN....BUT BEFORE THIS ACTION HE WILL REMOVE HIS *AMBASSADORS!
YOU MEAN LIKE NOAH AND LOT?
YES, MARTY. JESUS** PROMISED IN THE BIBLE TO REMOVE US BEFORE THE TRIBULATION... THIS IS THE BLESSED HOPE. WE CHRISTIANS CALL IT THE RAPTURE!
**Rev. 3:10 Titus 2:13
*2 Cor. 5:20
GUARDS!... THERE'S ONE WITHOUT A MARK ON HIS FOREHEAD....HE WAS TRYING TO BUY FOOD!
THE FOOL!
I'VE GOT HIM!
HEY, LET'S WATCH!.... THEY'VE CAUGHT ANOTHER ONE!
MARTYRDOM IS NOW THE PRICE OF SALVATION
THE TIME OF THE GREAT PLAGUES BEGINS
(PROPHESIED IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION)

Prophecies of the end times are published in comic strip form by a Californian company. In one tale a Jewish taxi driver, Marty (above left), is led to salvation by a Bible scholar's account of events in the near future (above centre). As if the prophecies weren't sufficiently exciting, an assassination attempt on the scholar is worked into the cartoon story; it is foiled by the power of prayer. In another publication (above right), mobile guillotines are depicted, busily despatching those who refuse to wear the mark of the Beast, or Antichrist

There have, of course, been countless interpretations of these words, and they continue to pour forth. Fictionalised accounts abound, full of planes suddenly rendered pilotless, traffic jams dotted with cars that are suddenly empty, and husbands dumbfounded by their wives' disappearance. Not all agree as to when precisely the Rapture will occur; whether before or during the Tribulation; but most believe it will come before. There is debate as to whether or not babies and young children, though unconverted, will be taken, on account of their very innocence. But the basic claim is simple: that members of the 'true Church', utterly committed Christians, will instantaneously be changed from their human, physical form, to a form in which they can travel through the air to join Christ, who will have travelled from heaven and established himself somewhere in the atmosphere. It is the kind of claim that makes most reports of previous paranormal events pale into sheer insignificance.

Commentators now try to avoid specific dates, for fear of getting them wrong. But for most the Rapture really is the event that signifies the beginning of the end. From that moment on, there seems to be a strict and relentless timescale, and an inevitable unfolding of a number of terrifying events, though opinions as to their precise order differ. We have already seen that a leader of immense power is expected to arise from a union of 10 kingdoms – a union that some have claimed to be the Common Market (see page 2314). By the time the Rapture occurs (and imagine what a shock it will be to those left behind!), he will be well on the way to world domination.

The world will be in an appalling condition by the time the Rapture occurs. One admittedly extreme cartoon booklet, entitled *The last generation*, includes in all seriousness such predictions as these: capital punishment will be inflicted on those who believe that Christ died for the sins of mankind; only candles will be permitted for lighting because of a shortage of electricity; because of pollution, water will cost $5.60 (about £3) a glass. Others see such conditions arising in the period *after* the Rapture, because it is the kind of thing that true believers are spared. *The coming world holocaust*, published by the Maranatha Revival Crusade, active in the Far East, picks up an astonishingly unpleasant quotation from Isaiah 9: 19–20, one not often used as a text for sermons!

Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts is the land darkened, and the people shall be as the fuel of the fire: no man shall spare his brother. And he shall snatch on the right hand, and be

Signing on with Satan

The number of the Beast, according to Revelation 13:18, is 666 – a number that has fascinated mystics and prophets throughout the centuries. Mary Stewart Relfe, an American author, has filled a book with examples of how these sinister digits crop up everywhere in these last days. They occur on credit cards, on the labels of shirts made in Red China, on an Egyptian warship that once carried the late President Sadat (her personal candidate, before his assassination, for the Antichrist), on government forms. She finds the number six wherever she looks: in the details of the first Apollo space flight to the Moon, for instance. 'Apollo' has six letters, each astronaut had six letters in his name, the return trip took six days, and so on. Each new sign strengthens her belief that the '666 system', a single worldwide cashless economy, is making its appearance. Soon only those who bear the mark of the Beast will be able to buy or sell.

She retails a story that now has a place in the canon of end times doctrine. In July and August 1980 the US Internal Revenue Service allegedly posted scores of social security cheques that carried new and extraordinary instructions: banks were not to cash the cheques unless the bearer had 'the proper identification mark' on either his right hand or his forehead. The government finally admitted, it is said, that the new instructions were issued by mistake – they were not due to come into force until 1984. A very similar story has since surfaced in Britain. However, no one can be found who has seen such a cheque.

> hungry; and he shall eat on the left hand, and they shall not be satisfied: they shall eat every man the flesh of his own arm.

The same booklet says: 'Kampucheans have tasted something of the Tribulation. But even their tragedies are but a few drops in a bucket, compared with the Tribulation that is shortly to come upon the whole world.'

Most of the interpretations concerning the seven-year Tribulation period derive from the most obscure of biblical books, the Revelation of St John. We shall deal only with the most popular interpretation.

If the time of the 'signs' seemed bad, the time of the Tribulation will be much worse, we are told. Though the list of events seldom differs between interpretations, the order of their occurrence does. However, two main themes become obvious. The first is appalling personal suffering from war, plague, famine and numerous other afflictions. These are divinely ordained because of Man's spiritual condition but are often brought about by Man himself through hate and greed. The second theme is satanically inspired political, religious, military and philosophical totalitarianism, having the Antichrist at its head, with its roots in the 'signs' of economic internationalism already outlined.

Dr E.J.M. Packer, a British evangelical of some standing, includes a précis of the political developments:

> Man is seeking to solve his economic problems in industry by amalgamations, etc, even internationally. Similarly, in an effort to answer political questions, we have the European Economic Community. It is suggested that this community will need a Supremo with almost dictatorial power in due course. In the Bible, the veil is lifted somewhat to give us a glimpse of such a man over a federation of nations. He is called the Man of Sin, the Son of Perdition and the Beast. He will be the Supremo over ten 'Kings', and 'Kingdoms'. At first he will support the woman in purple and scarlet, representing the religious world, but later he will destroy her. In his pride he will demand that divine honours be paid to him and to his image in the temple of God and throughout the world. His collaborator will be the False Prophet ('another beast'; possibly a Jew). Trading will be restricted to those bearing the identification sign of the Supremo, the Beast. His attitude to the Jews will be to make a covenant with them for a 'seven year' period, which will cover the Tribulation period, but halfway through this time he will break the covenant and turn against the Jews with bitter persecution. . . .

Portrait of the Antichrist as a young man. Harvey Stephens, aged five, played the part in the film *The omen* (1976). He bore the number 666, of course – as a birthmark on his scalp. Being the son of an American ambassador, the boy was well-placed to gain the political power that is prophesied for the Beast

The rise of the Antichrist

It is worth developing a couple of these points further. A common view is that the Antichrist, or Beast, will establish himself as a potential world leader after the failure of a Russian attack upon Israel. This is sometimes seen as a joint Soviet-Arab attack, but is always seen – following Ezekiel 39:4 – as having only one possible outcome:

> Thou shalt fall upon the mountains of Israel, thou, and all thy bands, and the people that is with thee: I will give thee unto the ravenous birds of every sort, and to the beasts of the field to be devoured.

In other words, God will have brought about the destruction of the invaders. But for some incomprehensible reason God will allow the Antichrist to receive the credit. Revelation 13:4 is quoted: 'And they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?' The war that establishes his power is often written of as the

Third World War, but it is often predicted that there will be at least two more to follow.

The covenant with the Jews is seen as providing the opportunity for the prophesied rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Mosque of Omar – the Dome on the Rock. (The end times literature has no more time for Islam than it has for Roman Catholicism.) A temporary prosperity then allows the Beast further to secure his position as world leader, promoting the kind of total religious ecumenism that the evangelical movement seems to dread.

Then, at some time towards the middle of the seven years, the Beast will introduce the 'mark of the Beast'. Nowadays this has come to be regarded as some form of laser-applied computer-coding without which people all over the world – which will have become cashless – will not be able to buy or sell food, drink or anything else. This, compounded by the taking over of the Temple at Jerusalem and the killing of those who will not there worship the Beast's image, is interpreted as the last achievement of mankind's apostasy. The surviving Jews are to go into hiding while the physical conditions of mankind deteriorate further, until the Antichrist, the Beast, decides that they must be destroyed. Then, in the Valley of Megiddo (known as Armageddon) in Israel, the final showdown takes place, between those Christians who have been converted *since* the Rapture and the armies of the Beast. During a dreadful battle, Christ returns – not to the air but to the ground – utterly defeats 'the kings of the Earth', and establishes the earthly millennium, a thousand-year period of peace, at the end of which all who are not already saved will be judged by the Lord.

Further reading

Charles Berlitz, *Doomsday – 1999*, Granada 1982

John A. Greed, *The next twenty years*, John A. Greed 1980

Mary Stewart Relfe, *When your money fails*, Ministries, Inc. (Montgomery) 1981

Below left: American survivalists with some of their supplies – food, silver and arms. The survivalists are highly diverse, but many are Christians who base their fears of imminent social collapse on biblical prophecy. However, they evidently do not believe in the Rapture – so they take refuge in fortified encampments in the mountains or the wilderness

Bottom: the ruins of the ancient Palestinian city of Megiddo, and the site at which the battle of Armageddon, the last great battle between the forces of good and evil, will take place, according to the book of Revelation

The aspect of human suffering has been left until last, because it is clearly the most important. If any or all of these horrors afflict the world it is not likely, surely, that it will be because any God has decided that it should: that cannot be anyone's idea of a God of love. And mankind may not be quite so stupid as to allow it all to happen.

The suffering promised us by the prophets and interpreters is quite unimaginable, and not surprisingly it is mainly derived from the book of Revelation. The features of the divine affliction are purported to include the making bitter of a third of the Earth's water, the turning to blood of a third of the sea, the death of a third of the sea creatures and fish, the destruction of a third of the ships, five months of locusts, scorching with great heat, three and a half years of drought, the death of over half the world's population, and three nuclear world wars! The picture is all gloom and despondency, with no way out till the end of the seven years. Whatever happened to the idea of divine forgiveness?

In the United States the Survivalist movement, too, is growing with frightening rapidity, as apparently intelligent Christians hole up in pseudo-military, all-white communities, waiting for nuclear war, the Tribulation or the uprising of the black population. It is not clear which they fear most but, unlike others who fear the Apocalypse, they seem to believe that weaponry will solve most of their problems. Their harsh and narrow-minded attitudes are the basis for a growing business in books and equipment.

There is prediction, and there is prophecy. From the evidence to hand in the paranormal field, both are possible, valid, even useful. But the prophecy, prediction, and interpretation offered in the end times and Evangelical movements are not the same thing at all; they are primarily subjective and dogmatic, and would not stand up to any scientific investigation. The beliefs appear to be a form of mass delusion, exploiting the fear and uncertainty that are natural in difficult times. There are close similarities between these and other beliefs deriving from supposed paranormal experience. But non-believers – and most Christians – would insist that, merely because they are said to have been drawn from the Bible, there is no more reason to believe these prophecies than those of Nostradamus or Edgar Cayce.

Cottingley: at last the truth

Were there really fairies in the woods at Cottingley? And did two children succeed in photographing them? In an exclusive interview with JOE COOPER, Elsie and Frances reveal the truth about the famous Cottingley pictures

THE COTTINGLEY FAIRY photographs made a journalistic sensation when they first appeared, in an article in the *Strand Magazine*, towards the end of 1919. And ever since they have been regarded as perhaps the most convincing evidence ever presented for the existence of fairies and the spirit world. But, in late 1981 and mid 1982 respectively, Frances Way (née Griffiths) and Elsie Hill (née Wright), who took the photographs – now, of course, old ladies – admitted that the first four pictures were fakes. Speaking of the first photograph in particular, Frances has told the present author on more than one occasion: 'My heart always sinks when I look at it. When I think of how it's gone all round the world – I don't see how people could believe they're real fairies. I could see the backs of them and the hatpins when the photo was being taken.'

How was the hoax set up? It started, as both ladies agree, with the best of intentions. Frances, she says, was able to perceive many forms of fairy life at the beck at the bottom of the garden of the Wright household and was, understandably, continually drawn back to the stream. Occasionally she fell in and wet her clothes, and was severely told off.

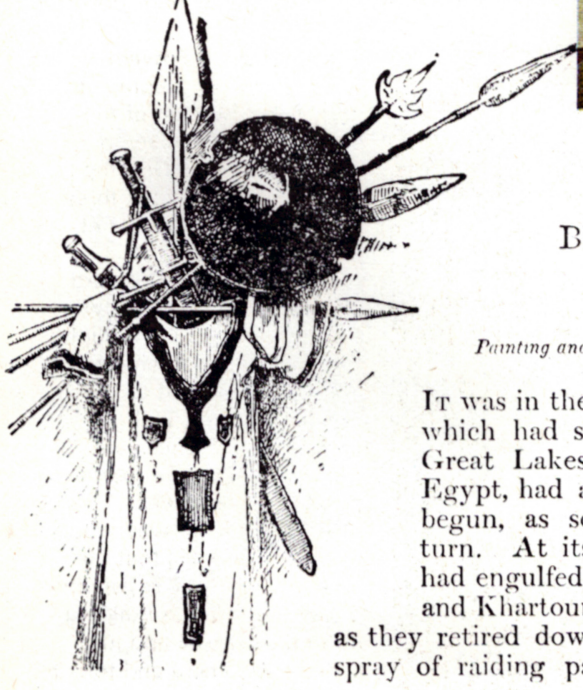
Elsie was much moved by the tears of her cousin, and sympathised with her when she blurted out to the adults that the reason why she went so often to the bottom of the garden was because there were fairies to be seen there. Although Elsie lacked Frances's keen perception of fairy life, she was sensitive to atmosphere and had a fine appreciation of the mysticism of nature.

Partly to take Frances's mind off her troubles, and partly to play a prank on grown-ups who sneered at the idea that fairies could be seen, but who cheerfully perpetuated the myth of Santa Claus, they conspired to produce fairy figures that they could photograph convincingly. Frances had a copy of *Princess Mary's gift book*, and the girls used a series of illustrations by Arthur Shepperson as a model from which Elsie – who had received some art training from the college in nearby Bradford – constructed the fairy figures (see page 2319). They cut the figures out using sharp tailor's scissors borrowed from Frances's mother, who worked as a tailoress in Bradford; they secured them to a bank of earth using hatpins. The girls took the famous photographs, dropped the cut-out figures into the swirling brook, and went home. How they gave the film to Mr Wright, and his surprise at seeing the fairy figures develop on the prints, is history.

The attitude of Elsie and Frances to the whole question of the fairy photographs is a typical Yorkshire one – to tell a tall story with a deadpan delivery and let those who will believe it do so. Indeed, Elsie has often said as much: 'I would rather we were thought of as solemn faced comediennes.'

About a month after the first photograph

The Cottingley fairy photographs were, their originators now admit, copied from illustrations in *Princess Mary's gift book*. Their champion, Conan Doyle, should have realised this – his story 'Bimbashi Joyce' (below) appeared in the same book



BIMBASHI JOYCE

BY A. CONAN DOYLE

Painting and Drawings by R. TALBOT KELL

IT was in the days when the tide of M which had swept in such a flood Great Lakes and Darfur to the co Egypt, had at last come to its full, begun, as some hoped, to show si turn. At its outset it had been ter had engulfed Hicks's army, swept ove and Khartoum, rolled behind the Briti as they retired down the river, and finally c spray of raiding parties as far north as

Below: the second Cottingley picture, which shows Elsie Wright playing with a gnome, was taken in August 1917. The point of the hatpin on which the paper cut-out figure was supported can plainly be seen as a protrusion on the gnome's stomach. Conan Doyle interpreted this as an umbilicus – a clear indication that birth in the fairy kingdom might be similar to human birth

was taken Elsie felt that she, too, would like to be photographed with a nature spirit of some kind. She made a gnome cut-out, which was duly hatpinned into the ground. Frances was a less expert photographer than Elsie and, according to her, the elongated hand in the picture is due to 'camera slant'; believers in the authenticity of the photographs have, however, attributed it to 'psychic elongation'.

If the second picture is examined, it is easy to see the point of a pin in the gnome's midriff. But Conan Doyle, after examining the print, concluded that the point was an umbilicus and that therefore birth in the fairy kingdom might be a similar process to human birth!

The two photographs were printed and circulated among the girls' friends in the autumn of 1918, and the matter gradually languished, with neither girl admitting to the truth of the affair, rather preferring to keep people guessing.

The following year Polly Wright, Elsie's mother, went to some Theosophical meetings, and so the prints came to be circulated at the Society's conference in Harrogate in the summer of 1919. By early 1920, they were in the hands of Edward Gardner, photographic and slide specialist of the Theosophical Society in London and president of the Blavatsky lodge (see page 2061), and he tried to persuade Polly to ask the girls to take more photographs. She, however, ignored his letters – and it was not until Doyle declared his own interest in the subject in June 1920 that matters began to develop in public.

In the summer of 1920, Gardner at last succeeded in persuading the girls to take a further series of photographs. These three last photographs were believed by both Gardner and Conan Doyle to constitute proof that it was possible to photograph fairies.

Frances, on the other hand, has always marvelled at the fact that anyone could believe them to be genuine. The flying fairy in the third photograph was pinned to the branch behind it; it was drawn freehand by Elsie, and seems to Frances to be out of proportion. The fairy offering flowers to Elsie in the fourth photograph was attached to a branch in a similar way, and sports a fashionable hairstyle that has attracted much comment.

The two cousins are divided about the authenticity of the fifth picture. To the casual eye, it looks very much like the result of a simple overlapping of photographs, but Frances insists that it is a genuine photograph of fairies. 'It was a wet Saturday afternoon and we were just mooching about with our cameras and Elsie had nothing

Encouraged by Edward Gardner, the photographic and slide specialist of the Theosophical Society in London, Frances Griffiths and Elsie Wright took three more fairy photographs at Cottingley during the summer of 1920. The third picture (above left) shows Frances with a fairy in flight; this was drawn freehand by Elsie, and attached to the branch behind it with a hatpin. Both Frances and Elsie admit that the fourth picture (far left) was taken in a similar way – but Frances maintains that the final picture (left) is genuine: 'I saw these fairies building up in the grasses and just aimed the camera and took a photograph'

prepared,' she says. 'I saw these fairies building up in the grasses and just aimed the camera and took a photograph.' Elsie, on the other hand, insists that all five photographs are of cut-outs. It must be borne in mind that Frances has often said that it is as if some psychological blockage prevents her remembering events surrounding the photographs with any accuracy; yet this discrepancy in the cousins' accounts of taking the photographs remains curious.

The second set of photographs was hailed with joy by Gardner. And, trapped by their first trick, Elsie and Frances had no choice but to remain silent; the consequences that would have resulted from any disclosures must have seemed terrifying to them.

Looking for fairies

In 1921, Conan Doyle asked the clairvoyant Geoffrey Hodson to go to Cottingley to check the girls' observations – essentially, to see if he, too, could see the fairies. His lengthy descriptions of fairy life, endorsed by the overawed Elsie and Frances – who saw nothing while Hodson was present, as they disclosed in a television interview in 1975 – appeared as key pages in Doyle's *The coming of the fairies* in 1922. Hodson went on to become a distinguished writer on clairvoyance; it is impossible to rule out the possibility that his experience may actually have been genuine.

This author once asked Elsie point blank whether she could still endorse her statements to Hodson as reproduced in Conan Doyle's book. 'You'll have to make your own mind up about that, Joe,' she said – again with a suspicion of that deadpan Yorkshire humour.

What conclusions are there to be drawn? Four of the five pictures, for certain, are hoaxes. Both Elsie and Frances, however, insist that the fairies themselves were real. Frances saw them particularly often:

> The first time I ever saw anything was when a willow leaf started shaking violently, even though there was no wind, I saw a small man standing on a branch, with the stem of the leaf in his hand, which he seemed to be shaking at something. He was dressed all in green.

Gradually, she began to see more and more of the elves. And in the summer of 1918, Frances saw fairies as well as elves:

> They were real fairies. Some had wings and some not. . . . They were once sitting in a patch of sunlight on a low bank. . . . It all seemed so peaceful and friendly. . . . Sometimes they came up, only inches away, but I never wanted to join in their lives.

Finally, she says, 'I became so used to them that unless they did something unusual I just ignored them.'

Do fairies exist? Can they be photographed? What is certain is that the Cottingley photographs cannot be regarded as proof of the existence of fairies. It is up to each of us to decide whether those people who report seeing fairies actually see them, or whether they merely imagine them.

The banks of the beck at Cottingley – where, Frances still maintains, she saw fairies. So, even if the Cottingley photographs are fakes, whether or not fairies exist remains an open question

Post script

Your letters to THE UNEXPLAINED

Dear Sir
As a naturalist and ecologist my attention was particularly drawn to your editorial comments following the letter from Mr Danny Ward in Postscript in issue 106 of *The Unexplained*.

I note that you refer to the rumour that 'there is no wildlife in or around the area of the former concentration camp at Auschwitz'. It would perhaps be simple to check this out. And it so happens that I can confirm that the area around Auschwitz was sufficiently well endowed with wildlife, at least during the period between October 1940 and August 1941, to justify it being described as an 'interesting' area as far as birdlife was concerned!

My information is gathered from a scientific paper I came across while researching a book on natural history. The paper in question was entitled 'Beobachtungen über Vögelwelt von Auschwitz' ('Observations on birdlife in Auschwitz') by one Günther Niethammer. He begins by acknowledging his gratitude to 'the Kommandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, SS-Sturmbannführer Höss and his Adjudant, SS-Obersturmführer Frommhagen' for permitting him to enter the area!

But clearly this area must have been a well-established site for such studies to be undertaken scientifically. If the rumour you refer to is true, then this would be most startling, since such well-established wildlife sites do not easily change their status – unless taken over by developments, industry or similar change of environment. One could, I suppose, consider the history of Auschwitz 'a man-made catastrophe' – but it would be interesting indeed to learn whether such dramatic events *could* alter the pattern of an established wildlife area.
Yours faithfully,
Carl A. Killingley High Wycombe, Bucks

The lack of wildlife in and around Auschwitz today was, as we pointed out, only a rumour – and had it proved to be correct, would have confirmed the alleged phenomenon of the reluctance of wildlife to go anywhere near places of historical butchery, such as some areas of Culloden Moor. We are grateful for this information, but it should be borne in mind that anyone, even a fanatical naturalist, who could have entered Auschwitz to study bird life *under the kind auspices of the camp Kommandant must have been a strange kind of human, and perhaps was the sort of 'scientist' who proliferated in that country at that time, believing in, among other 'proven facts', a hollow Earth (see page 530), worlds of ice and a 'master race'. But if birds there were, there would have been precious few crumbs for them to pick up.*

Dear Sir
In 1910 my father was a butler for Colonel Turner at Pinkney Park in Malmesbury, Wiltshire. He lived in one of the estate cottages down near the river. I never went down to see him while he was in this situation but, when I was on manoeuvres with the army in 1917, by a strange coincidence my company was deployed on the bank all along the road where my father had worked. We were defending Pinkney Park, the house being about a mile [1.6 kilometres] away up the hill, across the Park. Father's house was about 100 yards [90 metres] further on the other side of the road.

Pinkney Park had its fair share of ghosts and many have been written about. The most famous ghost was a monk who was alleged to have been seen by many, as he walked the grounds after being walled up alive.

My father never met any of the ghosts that were well-known but he had some interesting tales to tell nevertheless. He told us of a blood stain on the lower panel of the drawing room door and vouched for the fact that when the panel was replaced the stain reappeared on the new panel.

At another time a lady visitor came to stay for a holiday with her four children and their nurse. There were other guests: it was a complete house party. The lady had a bedroom in the grander part of the house, but the children and their nurse were put in a very large room some distance from the mother.

The house had only oil lamps and candles then, and both were used in the children's room. The nurse put the children to bed at the same time, for they were all very young. When she was sure they were asleep she got ready for bed herself, turned out the oil lamp and blew out the candles. Some time elapsed; they all slept. Then the nurse was awakened by the sound of the door being opened. She heard someone moving the furniture about, then there was a sound like a chair being knocked over. Some slight movements followed, then there was silence. The nurse lit a candle but could see nothing to account for the noises. The children had also been disturbed.

So the nurse went to the lady and told her what had transpired. The mistress instructed the nurse to bring the children to her room. The nurse slept on the ottoman at the foot of the bed, while the children slept with their mother.

In the morning the lady saw Mrs Turner and told her what had happened. She replied: 'That is nothing to be frightened about. That was a cook who hanged herself in the room. If you stay here you will probably see a parlour-maid on the top landing – she poisoned herself.' The lady said: 'No, I shall not, for I am leaving the house this morning!' My father was present when the conversation took place.

When there were a lot of visitors and my father had to work late he was in the habit of sleeping at the house. He had a room with a single bed; one day something odd happened as he was shaving. The bed had appeared undisturbed when he had entered the room but he suddenly saw the bedding move as though something were going round in circles under it. Then a large bird appeared to come out and fly through the open door into the passage – but it made no sound, and had completely vanished after it left the room. There was absolutely nowhere in the passage that the bird could have hidden, nor any outlet through which it could have escaped.

My father never slept in that room again, but walked home over a mile [1.6 kilometres] every night when he finished work, no matter what the time or weather!
Yours faithfully,
W.H. Digweed Sevenoaks, Kent

Send *your* letters to THE UNEXPLAINED, Orbis House, 20–22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT

THE WORLD'S MYSTERIOUS PLACES – 42
Aztec Ruins National Monument, New Mexico, USA